

‘Thy Kingdom Come’
A Sermon for Ascension Day, Festal Eucharist
Given at St Davids Cathedral by the Dean of Coventry
The Very Revd John Witcombe, on 10 May 2018

It’s wonderful to be here – thank you so much for inviting me. I know Dean Sarah and Bishop Jo well, so to share with them in ministry is an absolute joy. And my birthday is March 1st ... so I do feel some real kinship with this place.

Today, Ascension Day, completes the arc, so to speak, of Jesus’ incarnation ... I rather like to think of him flopping down at the kitchen table, flinging his scarlet robe over the back of the chair ... perhaps reaching for a gin and tonic, as the family gather around and say, ‘well – how was it?’ What might he have said. Would it have been a Douglas Adams’ ‘mostly harmless’? A Manley Hopkins’ “glorious – like shook foil”? An RS Thomas’ bleakness? What do you think he would have said?

And what did it do to him? What happened to him? There are so many stories about women and men, children too, making momentous journeys, and at the end of the novel, or the film, returning home different. “Well, I’m back” says Sam at the end of *The Lord of the Rings* – but he’s not the same, and his home will never be the same, because of where he has been.

So that takes us to the first truth of today’s feast: heaven will never be the same, because of Jesus’ incarnation, his death, resurrection and ascension - his inhabiting of earth. **Heaven now contains the stories of earth** – stories of loving and loss, of grieving and joy, of brokenness and healing. Stories of courage, and of hope, of despair overcome. Above all, stories of love winning through – so heaven and earth are joined, as it were, by elastic, by the heart of Jesus, in which he bears us and the truth of our lives into heaven.

The ‘thy kingdom come’ initiative is at its heart a call for us to pray that the world will come to know Christ. In truth, I find that language slightly problematic. I have been Christian, as a conscious, personal decision, now for over forty years, since I was sixteen. I have been living my life in relationship to Christ, praying, seeking to serve him, doing all that I can to understand what that might mean: but to say that I *know* him is not at all straightforward. If someone was to ask me, “what’s he like then” - as they might ask me about the Archbishop of Canterbury, or Bishop Jo, I would find it hard to answer, except in platitudes. I talk to him, and have a sense of his presence in my life - but it’s perhaps more important to understand that he knows me than that I know him. And he knows us, he knows what we are like, what we are capable of for good and for evil. He knows what we have made of his creation.

How do you think Christ would tell the story - perhaps did tell the story - flopping down in that kitchen-table chair. Back in the Rublev icon, which I was lucky enough to see face to face in Moscow back in January. What would make him weep, as he turns to the Father, side by side with the Spirit? ‘You wouldn’t believe what they’ve done with what we gave them ...’ and knowing, of course, what we did to him.’

So, our prayer, ‘thy kingdom come’ is a prayer that the world might know Jesus, yes - but also that we might know the world as Jesus knows it, see it as Jesus sees it, with all its brokenness but also all its wonder, its glory and its truth. And it’s a prayer that the world might become the world Jesus wants it to be ... that we might follow in the wake of Jesus, that as he conformed to us, we might now conform to him, who has taken our lives into heaven. We pray, in other words, that just as heaven came down to earth, that we might be lifted to heaven. (And then, of course, we will know Jesus - for we shall be with him, and we shall be like him.)

For this to happen, it needs to be revealed that **just as heaven contains the stories of earth, so must earth contain the stories of heaven.** We know something about that in my Cathedral, in Coventry. Funnily enough, stories of heaven breaking through on earth usually start with an experience of brokenness - and that, of course, is true for us. Our story of proclaiming the Christian faith in Coventry changed profoundly on November 14th and 15th 1940. Before then, we had a rather ordinary medieval parish church Cathedral, consecrated for the rebirth of the Diocese of Coventry in 1918 (we are just celebrating our anniversary). No one was really very interested in us. But then on that November night, clear and moonlit, 500 Luftwaffe bombers crisscrossed the city centre dropping heavy shells and incendiaries until half our houses were destroyed or damaged, some 500 people were killed, and the cathedral lay in ruins. The next morning my predecessor, Provost Howard, walked into the still smoking rubble with a commitment to rebuild as a sign of hope and a sign of peace. Only six weeks later the BBC World service Christmas broadcast came from the crypt chapel under the ruins, and Dick Howard shared the words of heaven, as he's said: "hard as it may be, we are seeking to banish all thoughts of revenge from our hearts and minds, and to build a kinder, a gentler, a more Christ Child sort of world in the days beyond this terrible conflict". Those words set us on a trajectory - the same trajectory, if you like, of Jesus in his ascension, taking the wounds he had received on earth into the very presence of God, onto the throne of heaven - and calling us to share in his ministry of reconciliation.

Twenty-two years after the Cathedral in Coventry as destroyed, a glorious new Cathedral was consecrated which incorporated the ruins, an abiding symbol of the brokenness which runs like a vein throughout the world, but which leads the visitor, the pilgrim, the worshipper past our extraordinary windows towards the Graham Sutherland Tapestry. Over seventy feet high, it portrays Christ in Glory, flanked by the four beasts of Revelation four - the object of our worship today on this feast of Ascension. So we worship in the context of hope and glory, but also brokenness - the open roof and empty windows of the ruins speaking more powerfully to the world around us of sharing their brokenness than any amount of pomp and grandeur. We speak often of Leonard Cohen: "there's a crack, a crack in everything - it's where the light gets in."

In the apse of the ruins, carved deep into the stone, are the two words, 'Father Forgive' - written first, perhaps, in soot, by Provost Howard back in 1940. They are an acknowledgement that we are all broken, all responsible for the destruction that breaks our world apart from itself, apart from God. They were a recognition that even in the face of the terrible destruction that my city experienced, we could not stand on a self-righteous pedestal, however graciously, and ask God to forgive those awful people who had done this to us - but instead, we were all responsible, so we alongside humanity to seek God's healing for us all. Many years later - around 1959 - the words became the refrain of the Coventry Litany which we have prayed already in this service. That Litany is now prayed around the world in over 200 centres of the Community of the Cross of Nails, in 30 countries - centres inspired by the Coventry story, working locally for our three priorities of **healing the wounds of history, learning to live with difference and to celebrate diversity, and to build a culture of peace.** The first cross of nails was made in the weeks after the bombing, from medieval nails fallen from the burning roof timbers, as a symbol of Christ's presence in the midst of destruction, making God's love, his forgiveness, his hope known even in the darkest places.

Today, that's what praying 'thy kingdom come' means for us. It does not mean, 'onward Christian soldiers, marking as to war'. It means instead knowing that the Kingdom is present but hidden, not forcing itself upon us but like shoots breaking through the soil's surface, rooted within us and bringing new life. As we celebrate ascension, it is to celebrate a risen and ascended Lord who still bears the wounds of crucifixion, and whose beauty, whose glory, is revealed in those wounds not despite them, because they are the wounds of love made real.

I asked Bishop Jo if you were so familiar with RS Thomas that for me to read him, as a visitor, would be simply out of place, but she encouraged me to do so. So I would like to end by returning

to one of the most beautiful texts for the Kingdom to help us to approach this task, this commitment to pray 'thy kingdom come' in this coming ten days of ascension tide - we are encouraged to pray every day for those know, and those we don't, to know Jesus. What does that mean? It means, amongst other things, that they might know and be part of the sort of world he wants to see - how Kingdom. This is RS Thomas' poem, The Kingdom:

It's a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. It's a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Readings: Daniel 7. 9-14; Acts 1.1-11; Luke 24. 44-53